

Making “Affective Statements” More Effective in Restorative Practices

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← If you are working to implement restorative practices in your school or youth focused organization, one of the many informal practices you may have learned is using “[affective statements](#).” I agree that affective statements can be a powerful way of modeling to kids and youth better ways to express our feelings. I also agree that using affective statements is a better way of pointing out behavior issues in a way the creates more connection between student and teacher. Here’s where I have a problem, the current books, toolkits, and even some workshops give examples of affective statements that sound more like blame statements than connection statements. I think we can do better. →

What are Affective Statements?

They are often described as personal expressions of feelings in response to others’ positive or negative behaviors. The idea is for teachers to connect students with how their behavior is “affecting” or impacting self or others. “Using affective statements helps us to specify the behavior that a student is exhibiting and encourage or discourage that behavior while improving or maintaining the relationship between the teacher and student.”

Many sources trying to teach affective statements give examples like this one from the [Fix School Discipline Toolkit](#):

“It makes me sad when I have to keep telling you to keep your arms by your sides when we’re walking in a line.”

A few examples from the [IIRP published book](#), The Restorative Practices Handbook for Teachers, Disciplinarians, and Administrators say:

“Lisa, I am frustrated that you keep disrupting class today”

“Don, I was shocked when I graded your paper. You are capable of doing much better”

When we say to others that our feelings are being caused by their behaviors, it will most likely be heard as blame and fault. “I am feeling this way because of YOU” and if you change your behavior, you will “MAKE ME” feel better. The statements above and the other examples I have seen fit the formula of state feelings and then explain how the feeling is the fault of the student. I am very uncomfortable with what this teaches kids. I am even more uncomfortable we haven’t changed this belief in our teachers.

First off, kids need to understand that nobody causes other people’s feelings or theirs. Kids benefit from learning that feelings are caused by needs being met or not met, not the actions of others. If other people’s actions caused our feelings, then each time they make that action, the same feeling would come for us. Except we know that isn’t true. On one day your student coming past the agreed time might leave us happy because we had a need for some privacy to catch up on emails. The next day, the same action of coming past the agreed time could leaving us feeling angry because we are needing more structure in our day. Our needs in the moment bring about our feelings not the actions of others. As [Marshall Rosenberg](#) would say, “Other people may be the stimulus for our feelings but they are never the cause.”

In the example above, Lisa is being sent the message that the teacher is feeling frustrated because of her actions. In reality, I would think the teacher is frustrated because she has a need for order, respect, or cooperation from her students. It isn’t Lisa’s “fault” the teacher is frustrated, it is the teacher’s needs. (*Maybe Lisa has a need for more excitement and activity in the lesson!!*)

We want students to look at their inner world more so they can learn emotional regulation. If they learn that their feelings are owned by and originate from themselves, they can then learn to get out of the blame game. Feelings are never someone’s “fault.” On the other hand, if we teach them (possibly through these type of blame statements) that they are the



cause of other's behavior, they are also learning the myth that other's control their feelings. When you see others as the source of your pain, you increase the likelihood you will want to punish them when the feelings hurt or cause pain. This continues the cycle of violence.

In the example above with Don, not only is the statement full of blame, it is also laced with a tinge of diagnosis of Don and his capabilities. If Don disagrees, this

statement is likely to cause shame and disconnection, not connection. If he agrees he will only feel disappointed rather than motivated for change. These types of statements are better than the alternative of criticizing students behavior as good or bad, right or wrong. They still could be made to be more connecting for both students and teachers. That connection or relationship based classroom style could be much impacting than the model being used.

I would like to see RP practitioners move toward Marshall Rosenberg's Nonviolent Communication (NVC) model of Observations, Feelings, Needs, and Requests (OFNR) as the new and improved way of doing affective statements. The formula is fairly simple and with practice will be far more "affective" than the typical statements currently being taught in the RP models. Of course, I would like to see RP practitioners combining all of Rosenberg's materials and ideas into the work they do. I still believe starting with OFNR is a nice first step if you are not ready in your life for everything Marshall proposed.

How does it work?

Observations: If we want to point out to students exactly what behavior we want to address, we are best to do that in ways that don't dredge up shame, defensiveness, or resistance to our feedback. I suggest starting with an observation of the behavior free of judgments, criticism, blame, or diagnosis. Looking at the examples above, it is point about what Lisa is doing to "disrupt" the class rather than judging the behavior as disruptive. "Lisa, when I hear you talking at the same time I am talking" would be an example. Another example from the above quotes would be "This is the 3rd time I have seen you with your

hands in the air” as opposed to “I have to keep telling you” which sounds more like judgment. Observations are about separating what happened from the story we tell ourselves about what happened.

Feelings: It is first and most important that we follow the words “I feel” with a word that

describes physical emotions when doing affective statements. We want to model for students how to express their emotions using their words rather than acting out their emotions in negative ways. Most of us remember our first



grade teacher saying “use your words” as opposed to having us act out our feelings. It becomes important for teachers to develop a strong vocabulary of feeling words. Be careful of following “I feel” with thoughts. (I feel like, I feel as if, I feel that you) We also want to steer clear of pseudo-feelings. These tend to be words that evaluate or accuse others of a behavior. (Examples: disrespected, threatened, bullied, misunderstood) Make sure you express your feelings and emotions with words that actually express a physical experience you are having.

Needs: It is important to follow a feeling with a need and not a blame statement about other people. We need to own our feelings and the best way to do that is to learn to associate our feelings with the needs behind them. Our feelings act much like the dashboard in a car. Your car’s dashboard has a light that comes on to tell you it needs gas, another that tells you you need air in your tires, mine is constantly telling me to service engine soon. Our emotions do something similar for us. We we feel tired, it is our bodies way of telling us we need rest. When we feel hungry, we most likely need food. When we feel scared, it may mean we have a need for safety. This is the best way of making an affective statement. “I feel.....because I need.....” as opposed to “I feel because you....”

Requests: If we are going to go through the trouble of pointing out the behavior, expressing our feelings and needs, we might as well ask for what would make life more wonderful! Ask

for what would meet your needs. Be as direct and clear as possible with something doable.

Ask for what you DO want rather than what you DON'T want. Honor choice by starting with "Would you be willing.....?" Be prepared and welcome to hear NO.

Let's take a look at what these statement would look like using the examples written in the Restorative Practices Handbook from IIRP and then what they would look like if we used Marshall's NVC approach of OFNR:

Revamping Affective Statements in Restorative Practices			
Typical Response:	Example Affective Statement	Problem with Affective Statement	NVC - Version
Stop teasing Sandy	It makes me uncomfortable when I hear you teasing Sandy	Feeling is blamed on student behavior & teasing is a judgement	When I heard you speaking to Sandy in the way you did, I felt worried because I value respect. Would you be willing to tell me what you were talking about?
Talking during class in inappropriate	I am frustrated that you are not listening to me	Feeling is blame based & accuses student of not listening rather than expressing need to be heard.	When I hear you talking at the same time I am talking, I feel frustrated because I would like to be heard. Would you be willing to raise your hand when you want to talk?
You shouldn't do that	I feel sad when you say something like that to John	Aside from blame and accusation, there is also a bit of shame in this statement	When I heard what you said to John, I felt sad because I value respect. Would you be willing to tell me what you were thinking about when you said that?
Sit down and be quiet	I feel angry when you talk and joke during my lectures	Blame based statement. Teachers feelings attributed to student's behavior.	When I see you walking around the class and talking while I am doing a lecture, I feel angry because I really value collaboration in the class. Could I ask you to tell me how that sounds to you?
I don't want to see you fighting with him	I was shocked to see you hurt Pete	Makes a judgment about what happen perhaps without know facts. Blames student for feeling of shock so teacher no longer owns feeling.	When I saw you put your hands on Peter, I was scared because I really want safety for everyone in my classroom. Would you be willing to tell what happen between you?

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Conclusion

I truly believe we could transform schools, organizations for youth, and our families by implementing restorative practices. We just need to make sure we can model the discipline we are trying to get from our students. If we want students who can “use their words” rather than violent actions to express themselves, we need to model how it is done. It is also import for us to model what a blame free world looks like.

I also focused this article on the use of affective statements to address negative behaviors. I also think we can use affective statements following the same formula to express gratitude instead of praise. Trading praise for gratitude is another powerful way of allowing youth and kids to see the “impact” of their actions rather then hear judgements about their actions. More to come on that in future articles!

Lastly, I don’t intend to slam anyone with this article and I highly recommend the book listed below. I learned tons from it and continue to use it as a resource. I simply want us to make our practices better!

Download a helpful free 18 x 24 inch poster to help you with your honest expression statements (affective statements)



Sources not otherwise linked:

Costello, Bob; Wachtel, Joshua; Wachtel, Ted (2013-12-11). The Restorative Practices Handbook for Teachers, Disciplinarians and Administrators (Kindle Location 216). International Institute for Restorative Practices. Kindle Edition.

IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO LEARN MORE ABOUT AFFECTIVE STATEMENTS AND RESTORATIVE DIALOGUE, JOE BRUMMER WILL BE PRESENTING A DAY LONG INTENSIVE AT SUFFOLK UNIVERSITY JANURY 26, 2017. [CLICK HERE FOR DETAILS](#)

